

Many docs have kept quiet on errors, incompetence: study

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Nearly half of 1,662 physicians surveyed say they have declined to report incompetent behavior or medical errors by their peers, according to a new study.

The survey of primary-care and specialty physicians found that 45% weren't always reporting impaired or incompetent colleagues in their practices, and 46% of physicians who knew of a serious medical error were not reporting the error "at least once" to authorities. The study was conducted by the Institute on Medicine as a Profession's Survey on Medical Professionalism, and appears this week in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

"This raises serious questions about the ability of the medical profession to regulate itself," said Eric Campbell, one of the lead authors of the study, who attended a news conference to release the survey, along with other researchers and members of the physician community.

Although nearly half don't report instances of incompetence or medical errors, nearly all of the physicians surveyed said that they believed such instances should be reported to the proper authorities. Some 93% thought physicians should report all significant medical errors to authorities, and 96% thought physicians should report all instances of impaired or incompetent colleagues to authorities.

Researchers said that they found other large gaps in what physicians believe and what they actually do in practice. For example, 98% said they wanted to minimize racial and ethnic disparities in patient care, but only 25% actually looked for that gap in their own practice.

Physician representatives at the news conference responded that efforts were under way to improve accountability in the medical profession. One problem is state medical boards don't always have the ability to discipline physicians, "They can only respond to complaints," said James Thompson, president and chief executive officer of the Federation of State Medical Boards.

While the boards should be given more authority to take action against incompetent physicians, nonpunitive actions should also be established, such as offering remediation programs for physicians practicing bad medicine, Thompson said. -- by Jennifer Lubell